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The Bible and Homosexuality

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THE BIBLE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

A Bible Study compiled by the
Reverend Michael E. England

(NOTE: This study is not footnoted. However, the vast majority of factual information and much of the interpretation based upon the facts is assembled from the books found in the bibliography. In some cases, while not quoted directly, specific formulations of opinion are paraphrased from these writers.)

INTRODUCTION

There is a small group of Scripture passages which is commonly cited in opposition to homosexual activity. This study deals with those, and with some others on which theological or doctrinal positions opposing homosexual activity have been based.

There are three major goals in this course. The most important is to witness to the accepting love of God with persons who may feel alienated from faith and from themselves because of their homosexual orientation. There is also an important witness to those struggling with homosexuality in a loved one. The second goal is essential to preparing for the first. It is to provide you with a sound understanding of what the Bible says and does not say. Thus, you can come to understand more fully that there is, indeed, no condemnation for homosexual people in God's Word. Third, this course may lead to productive discussion with people who use Scripture to indict or condemn homosexual people, especially homosexual Christian people.

Compelling concerns draw us to study this issue. The scholars who form the major resources for us did not set out to argue and refute the Bible. Neither do we in The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches do so. To the contrary, contained in our bylaws is this affirmation, "This Fellowship acknowledges the Holy Scriptures, interpreted by the Holy Spirit in conscience and faith, as its guide in faith, discipline, and government." On one hand is our belief in God's revelation and in our own experience of God. On the other hand we see the condemnation and despair in the traditional interpretation of some passages. This seems inconsistent. We know God is consistent and so we look for greater consistency in understanding God's Word.

The basic issue is interpretation of Scripture based on sound study. Every person who approaches Scripture comes to it as an interpreter, even those who claim to be most "literal". We in UFMCC affirm the Bible's authority without reservation. We also affirm the individual's competence to seek God's guidance in coming to a personal interpretation of Scripture. But with this

freedom of individual interpretation comes responsibility. We must learn through rigorous means of interpretation what Scripture says to us now. This certainly does not mean invalidating or disproving any portion of scripture. It does mean learning about the nature and message of Scripture. We often spend far more effort in education or training for our careers than in study and examination of the faith on which we base our entire lives.

Some people are satisfied to prove the traditional condemnation of homosexual activity to be unbiblical. They assert that these passages of Scripture do not condemn us and they leave the matter there. In this study we shall go further, to seek interpretations of the passages which do hold lessons for us. As the writer of the letter to Timothy said,

Every inspired scripture has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, or for reformation of manners and discipline in right living. (II Timothy 3:16 NEB, Italics mine)

INSPIRATION

The passage from II Timothy describes Scripture as "inspired". Most of us have some assumption about how the Bible was inspired, how God caused it to be written. Our assumptions are often unexamined, simply accepted as taught by others. They could be far more useful to us if they were explored and developed to suit our mature understanding of God.

One major school of opinion believes that the Bible in its original languages and its original manuscripts was inerrant in the whole and in every part. In this view, the writers used their own words which, by God's inspiration, were the exact words God wished them to write. This "plenary verbal" school of thought acknowledges that over many centuries changes have crept into the texts due to human error. It maintains, however, that these changes are relatively few, and strives to move toward reconstructing what it finds to be the original, perfect Word of God.

Another school of opinion, equally convinced of God's inspiration of Scripture, proposes that the plenary verbal process seems inconsistent with the belief that God creates human beings with free will. It believes that God did not abridge this freedom in the process of inspiration. It sees the plenary verbal process as a point when God took control of and employed human beings as "stenographers". That seems to assume that God is unwilling to inspire through the natural, creative processes of humanity which God created and sustains.

This second school of opinion believes that God's inspiration came through human individuals, expressed in the human symbols of language. These symbols, like their writers, are imperfect, striving to reflect the perfection of God. The writings and canon (those writings chosen to be included in the Bible) developed through human processes, directed by God, over the course of history. The Bible is the record of human pilgrimage toward the understanding of God's self-revelation. And the Bible is itself part of that revelation.

Both of these schools of thought agree in the conviction that the Bible is divinely inspired. Neither rejects any part of the Bible. Both involve responsible people of God, scholars searching for enlightenment. The different views of the process of inspiration do affect the process of interpretation. Interestingly, however, scholars from both schools tend to arrive through their study at remarkably similar interpretations of the particular passages we shall study.

CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

Augustine warned in his writings of the danger of taking literally figurative language in the Bible, and vice versa. He said that the authors of Scripture made use of all the rhetorical forms known to grammarians. John Calvin, who would have liked to assert the inerrancy of Scripture as it stood in his day, found himself forced to admit minor errors existing in his contemporary version. He also maintained that Scripture is not its own authority, but that God is the authority of Scripture. The early Christians understood the Bible (the Old Testament) not from its

text alone, but from the mass of legends and legal decisions which Jewish culture had gathered around it in previous centuries. All of these represent historical aspects of Biblical interpretation.

Before we deal specifically with the Scripture passages at issue, it is necessary to learn some of the principles of interpreting them. In this way, you will be equipped to make responsible decisions on your own about the interpretations, not only of these passages, but of whatever Scripture you may study.

Critical interpretation is the process of exploring how the Bible was formed and transmitted. Sometimes this is also called "higher criticism". "Criticism" is the act of making judgements. It is a means toward deeper and better understanding of the Bible. The popular connotation of "criticism" which implies attacking or debunking is in no sense involved. We presuppose God's action in inspiring Scripture and go on from there.

Jesus himself engaged in biblical interpretation. He insisted on the authority of the Bible and he also criticized and reinterpreted it. In Mark 10:19 he maintained its authority:

You know the commandments: You must not kill; You must not commit adultery; You must not steal; You must not bring false witness; You must not defraud; Honor your father and mother.
(JB)

However, in Mark 2:27 and 3:3-5 he reinterpreted the Sabbath:

He also said to them, "The Sabbath was made for the sake of humanity and not humanity for the Sabbath." (NEB, inclusive)

He said to the man with the withered hand, "Rise and come forward;" then he asked them, "Is it right to help or to hurt on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" They were silent. Then glancing around him in anger and vexation at their obstinacy, he told the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out and his hand was quite restored. (Moffatt)

In relation to the Jewish law of divorce which begins in Deuteronomy 24:1:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house

(RSV)

he went so far as to contradict it in Mark 10:11:

And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her." (ASV)

The science of interpretation is called hermeneutics, from a Greek word which means to interpret or explain. Hermeneutics deals with the history, principles, laws and methods of interpretation. Old and New Testament hermeneutics are somewhat different. One reason is that, while we may be fairly certain that the books of the New Testament were written by single authors, the books of the Old Testament were, in most cases, written by numbers of authors working over spans as long as centuries.

There are three objectives of biblical interpretation. One objective is the discovery of the meaning of a passage to the first readers. Out of this, the interpreter wishes to draw the universal principle which is not limited to the particular time and place of any one reader. Based on that comes the major objective, that of discovering the present, specific application of the universal principle.

In studying, we should initially give preference to that meaning which is clearest and most evident. We should try to interpret the author in consistency with the whole body of the author's writing. It is important, too, to consider the way a passage relates to those which surround it.

Individual words in a passage should be interpreted in harmony with their meaning in the time of the author. The New Testament, after all was written in Koine Greek, a living and

changing language which people spoke to each other every day on the street and in their homes. Imagine, two thousand years from now, the problem in translation of the word "gay" which has quite separate and distinct meanings in our living and growing language. We shall meet this kind of problem in the passages we shall be studying in the New Testament later on.

Writings in the Bible have particular literary qualities. Paul's writings are letters to people he knew. Quite differently, the Book of Daniel and the Revelation are a special type of Jewish literature known as apocalyptic. In this literary form it was usual to set the writing either in a time in the writer's past (Daniel was actually written some centuries later than the setting of the Babylonian Exile) or in the future (the Revelation is set in the "end times"). The writings concerned the day in which they were written and the removal in time was to provide a perspective from which to comment on current events.

Another special characteristic of apocalyptical literature brings us to the question of authorship. It was a convention of this literary form to claim the name of a famous person as author. For this reason, though the Revelation claims to be written by the Apostle John, we are fairly certain that this is not the case. We can deduce information about the authorship from other factors, as well. We look at the quality of Greek or Hebrew used, vocabulary, construction and so forth. We look at the character of thought in the writing. Through factors such as these we have been able to conclude, for instance, that the letters to Timothy were probably not written by the Apostle Paul. Some similarities in ideas and vocabulary do indicate that the writer may have been Paul's disciple.

The books of the Hexateuch (the first six books of the Old Testament), five of which are traditionally ascribed to Moses, actually are composed of at least four distinct sources of authorship, in the view of many scholars. This is known as the "Four Document Hypothesis", and will be explored later.

Critical interpretation is divided into four major fields of study.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM. This is the attempt to reconstruct as nearly as possible the original text of a passage as written by the author or authors. Textual criticism of the Old Testament found its beginning when Elijah ben Asher announced in 1538 that the vowel points and accents of the Hebrew Bible were of considerably later date, added by the Massorettes in the First Century c.e., than the fixation of the original text. This upset the belief in the verbal inspiration of the text as it stood, since there could be no certainty that the present reading was the correct one.

The vowels which were inserted may or may not have been the ones the writers intended. For an illustration of the issue, let us look at one of the names of God in the Old Testament. Its original form may be transliterated as YHWH or JHVH. Only the addition of the vowel points much later gave us the readings YahWeH or JeHoVaH. The problem is that in many cases in Hebrew a change of vowels produces a completely different word.

The impact of textual criticism upon attitudes toward the New Testament was also radical. This came into sharp focus with the appearance of a manuscript of the New Testament in Britain which was known as the Codex Alexandrinus. This manuscript was a gift from the Turkish monarch to the British. The gift was made in 1628, only a few years after publication of the Authorized or King James Version. That version was translated from the Textus Receptus ("Received Text") compiled from Greek manuscripts by a great scholar named Erasmus. There were various, different versions even of the Textus Receptus in existence and it was not considered definitive even before 1628. However, the Codex Alexandrinus contained earlier and more reliable Greek texts than did the Textus Receptus. In some ways, then, the King James Version was obsolete less than twenty years after its publication.

One example of an important textual variant between the Textus Receptus and more reliable ancient texts is found in I John 4:19. The translation in the Authorized Version reads:

We love *him*, because he first loved us. (*Italics mine.*)

More reliable texts, however, are translated:

We *love*, because he first loved us. (*Italics mine.*)

This is a radically different statement about our Christian life and responsibility.

In the Fourth Gospel, verses 5:3b-4 present a picture of God's action, in referring to the infirm gathered at the Pool of Bethesda, which has long disturbed some Christian minds:

--waiting for the moving of the waters; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons in to the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which s/he was afflicted. (ASV footnote, inclusive)

It is interesting to know, then, that in more reliable manuscripts this passage is simply not present.

The story of the adulterous woman brought to Jesus for judgement, traditionally found in the Fourth Gospel, 7:53 through 8:11, is another seriously doubtful passage. In many reliable texts the passage is not present at all. In some others, while it is present it is located variously at two other points in the Fourth Gospel or even in Luke. It is present in only one manuscript which dates earlier than the Ninth Century.

There are many ways in which such changes happened. In the long process of hand copying, changes and omissions sometimes occurred accidentally. Such changes sometimes occurred because the copyist believed that there was already an error in the text. So, in what was believed to be a correction, the copyist actually introduced an error. Marginal notes in manuscripts may sometimes have been inadvertently incorporated into the copied text itself, as well.

There were also errors of misreading or mishearing. In

this regard, it is helpful to know that the pronunciation of Koine Greek which has traditionally been used by biblical scholars was developed as a hypothesis by Erasmus in the Sixteenth Century. It probably bears some relation to the actual pronunciation but involves a good deal of conjecture. Greek scholars are presently leaning toward the modern rules of Greek pronunciation as closer to the ancient ones. (For instance, the letter χ in our UFMCC logo -- the first letter in the Greek word for Christ -- is pronounced in Erasmus' system "kigh" and in modern Greek "kee".) Use of modern pronunciation rules immediately explains some textual variants which previously seemed inexplicable. There are certain letters and diphthongs which sound exactly alike. For instance, the vowels η and ϵ and the diphthongs $\alpha\epsilon$ and $\epsilon\alpha$ all share the phonetic sound ee, though in the traditional pronunciation all sounded different. The similarity in pronunciation means that different words in spelling and meaning may sound the same. Hand copying was often done in a room in which many scribes copied while the text was read aloud. It is easy to surmise, then, how homonyms might easily and accidentally have been substituted for one another in copying, thereby altering the passage.

Ideally, knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is necessary to basic interpretation. Both languages have important subtleties and reveal cultural differences. However, this ideal should not discourage or exclude you if you do not read these languages. You can learn that you need to consult resources written by scholars who do know them. Such Bible commentaries are available in many forms and are extremely useful, so long as you remain aware of the interpretive biases of the commentators. It is best to consult more than one commentary, preferably from different theological outlooks ("fundmental", "liberal", "moderate", etc.). You can compare them to see where information is similar, where opinions diverge and what the strengths and weaknesses of reasoning seem to be. Based on that, you can make your own interpretation. (Remember, too, that one or two volume commentaries, while inexpensive and handy, are limited by the fact of their brevity. The same is true for study Bibles, which include commentary and cross references which are also commentary as marginal or footnotes.)

You need to keep a number of translations of the Bible available so that you can compare them. Recall the fact that the Authorized Version is often unreliable for study, though it is familiar and it is the most beautifully poetic of the translations. First, it is written in English hundreds of years old. English words often have different meanings to us now. Second, as explained earlier, it is translated from Greek texts which in many cases have been supplanted by better ones. Also, as will be explored later, the translators did not have the benefit of historical data which is now available to shed light on the translation of unknown words and passages.

Translations, also, are to some extent interpretations by the translators, since neither Greek nor Hebrew can be translated word for word into English. It is important to know the theological bias of the translators. (For instance, the Authorized Version was the product of Seventeenth Century Church of England scholars, the New English Bible was translated by Twentieth Century Anglicans and the Jerusalem Bible was translated by Twentieth Century French Roman Catholics). In some cases, such biases are allowed to affect the tone or word choices in translation. Another consideration is special goals of some translations. For instance, Today's English Version was translated with the goal of using language at the level of a newspaper, which leads to oversimplification of words and ideas.

Some words or phrases, because of the difference in thought patterns between Greek or Hebrew and English, can result in confusion of interpretation. For instance, the Authorized Version translated Matthew 26:27 as:

Drink ye all of it.

By placing emphasis on different words, completely different interpretations of that sentence can result. No such confusion exists in the original Greek, however, and contemporary translations have done a clearer job of rendering it:

Drink from it, all of you. (NEB and ASV)

Drink all of you from this. (JB)

Drink of it, all of you. (Moffatt)

There is a great difference between a translation and a paraphrase. A paraphrase is intended to be an interpretation, and will tell you on its title page that it is a paraphrase. It couches the translated text itself in the opinions of the paraphraser, and when reading it one must be even more aware than with a translation of the biases and opinions on which it is based. Among the most commonly available paraphrases are the J.B. Phillips Version and the Living Bible.

There is an outstanding case in point of the possible abuse of a paraphrase in the Living Bible. I Samuel 20:41 occurs in the story of David and Jonathan and is translated in the Jerusalem Bible:

Then they kissed each other and both shed many tears.

In the Living Bible this verse becomes:

They sadly *shook hands*, tears running down their cheeks.
(It *lics* mine.)

The Jerusalem Bible translated the instruction of Paul in Romans 16:16:

Greet each other with a holy kiss.

The Living Bible renders the same verse:

Shake hands warmly with each other.

(See also I Corinthians 16:20 and I Thessalonians 5:26.) It seems apparent that a certain fear of open affection may have inspired this particular paraphrase. Interestingly, given this caution about the Living Bible, it is especially good at telling Old Testament stories with the dynamic power which the Hebrew writers intended.

If you approach interpretation of the Bible, then,

without knowledge of Hebrew and Greek but with an understanding of these aids to interpretation, you may achieve a fine degree of competence in your study.

HISTORICAL CRITICISM. This is examination of biblical material in light of movements contemporary to the writing. Science provides great assets to historical criticism. Archaeological discoveries, for instance, continue to illuminate biblical material. Such important discoveries include the Nile Valley ruins in 1798 and Champollion's deciphering of hieroglyphics in 1822, which gave us access to Egyptian writings coming from an age when Egypt ruled much of the known world and received correspondence from every part of it. Rawlinson's deciphering of cuneiform in 1846 shed light on events and lifestyles in the Tigris and Euphrates area which aid in understanding of the Old Testament, too. The unearthing and translation of thousands of texts in the Near East tell us a great deal about events during which many parts of the Bible were written. Ruins and artifacts themselves give valuable information.

The Hebrew word פִּימָה (pim) occurs in I Samuel 13:21. When the translators of the Authorized Version came to this word, they were at a loss about its meaning. From the context, a passage about sharpening tools and weapons, they decided that it was a file:

Yet they had a file for the mattocks, and for the coulters, and for the forks, and for the axes and to sharpen the goads.

However, centuries later archaeologists unearthed a small artifact labelled "pim". It was a weight, used on a scale to measure payment for the service of sharpening. Current translations reflect the new knowledge:

The price was two-thirds of a shekel for plowshares and axes, and one-third for sharpening mattocks and straightening goads. (NEB)

Our system of determining modern dates is based on the

dating of Jesus' birth in the year 1 c.e. We now know through archaeology when Quirinius was governor of Syria (as mentioned in Luke 2:2). We also know the year of the death of Herod the Great, who spoke to the magi and ordered the slaughter of all male children under the age of two. These new facts indicate to us that Jesus was actually born sometime in the year 4 b.c.e.

The process of historical exegesis, then, is the effort to reconstruct the historical situation which underlay a passage in the Bible. There are four facets to this study. First, we wish to determine the character, mental habits and distinctive views of the author (another reason for the importance of establishing the author's identity). It is also helpful to know the author's environment and heritage of ideas. Second it is important to know how the writing was affected by what the author knew about the people who would be reading the work. The date of the writing connects us to events of the time which we know from history, archaeology and other sources. It will tell us about the progress of thought and limitations on the writer. Finally, we need to know the occasion and purpose of the writing.

SOURCE CRITICISM. This is the effort to discover the sources used by the author(s) or compiler(s) in arriving at the present form of the book or passage we are studying. For instance, The "Four Document Hypothesis" mentioned earlier is based on source criticism of the Hexateuch. One of the intertwined sources consistently used the name JHVH in speaking of God. Another used Elohim. So one is called the J (Jahwist) source and the other the E (Elohlist). A third, the D source, is found primarily in the book of Deuteronomy, while the P (Priestly) source is from a relatively late period, during the Israelite monarchy, and is recognized by certain choices of vocabulary and concepts.

Let us look, for instance, at the difference between the way the P source speaks of God and the way the J source speaks of God. P's picture is almost cosmic, understanding God as Spirit:

When God began to form the universe, the world was void and vacant, darkness lay over the abyss; but the spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Genesis 1:2 (Moffatt)

The J source is much more anthropomorphic, earlier in time and less sophisticated. Here, God breathes, moulds from the earth:

The God the Eternal moulded man [sic] from the dust of the ground, breathing into his nostrils the breath of life; this was how man became a living being. Genesis 2:7 (Moffatt)

In the Flood account we also find two stories, sometimes very different, woven together by a later editor. Compare the differences in God's specifications for the number of animals Noah was to take on the Ark. First the J source in Genesis 7:2-3:

Of all the clean animals you must take *seven* of each kind ... of the unclean animals you must take two ... (and of the birds of heaven also, *seven* of each kind ...). (JB, italics mine)

Then the later P source as found in Genesis 6:19-20:

From all living creatures, from all flesh, you must take of each kind.... Of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of reptile on the ground, two must go.... (JB, italics mine)

Another contrast is found in the mentioned duration of the Flood. First the J story, Genesis 8:6:

At the end of *forty days* Noah opened the porthole he had made in the ark and he sent out the raven. (JB, italics mine)

While P says in Genesis 8:3:

After *one hundred fifteen* days the water fell.... (JB, italics mine)

In another instance of the difference between J's anthropomorphic picture of God and P's more spiritual one, we can see God taking direct, physical action in J's Genesis 7:16b:

And Yahweh closed the door behind Noah. (JB)

while God leaves the action to Noah in P's 8:13b:

Noah lifted back the hatch of the ark and looked out. (JB)

These illustrations provide some insight into source criticism of the Old Testament and how it is approached. In the New Testament, source criticism is used primarily in examining the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. All three contain material from a common source, probably from Mark, which is the earliest of the three. Both Matthew and Luke also contain material not found in Mark, and each of them also contains material not found in the other. This indicates the use of a number of sources for the material from which each evangelist wrote a gospel. The Fourth Gospel comes from material which differs sharply from that found in the Synoptics. Source criticism, of course, does not apply widely to the remainder of the New Testament, which is identifiably the product of various individual writers, with only occasional incorporation of other source material.

FORM CRITICISM. The fourth division of biblical criticism is primarily concerned in the New Testament with the oral period which preceded the writing of the gospels in the latter portion of the First Century. The gospel tradition circulated for decades in small units of oral memorized material. These units can, in the gospels, often be identified and classified according to form. The "Sermon on the Mount", for instance, seems to be a collection of Jesus' sayings which may have circulated independently before being written down.

Form criticism may be similarly applied to units of material found in the Old Testament. There are comparisons, for instance, between the story of the destruction of Sodom in Genesis (and the related story in Judges) and similar stories of destruction by divine action for sins found in the literature of contemporary societies. Archaeology has provided for us a great saga from Babylonian writing called the Gilgamesh Epic. Part of that epic is so similar to the Flood stories in Genesis that it may be related very closely.

Any of you can read the writings of various interpreters

of the Scripture passages at issue in this study. However, this process and the tools of interpretation can equip you to weigh the evidence which other interpreters present. You can examine their opinions and how they were reached. And then you can make a personal decision on what you find to be a valid interpretation of each passage. Even when existing commentators arrive at interpretations which do not condemn homosexuality, they sometimes disagree widely. Your decisions become especially important at these points.

"THE BIG EIGHT"

There are eight passages in the Bible which have most commonly been cited in direct condemnation of homosexual activity. Some others are related to or comment upon them. It should be noted that the sexist bias with which the authors colored their inspired writings is apparent in the fact that only one of these passages may refer to homosexual activity among women.

Remember, in approaching interpretation, that specific occurrences of sexism apply only in understanding the application of a passage for its original readers. In understanding the universal application of a passage, we may justly acknowledge our fuller understanding of the value of every human being under God. We can then move to God's inclusive universal Word before we come to the point of drawing a specific contemporary application.

Deuteronomy 23:17-18. (Related passages -- I Kings 14:22-24, 15:22, 22:46, and II Kings 23:7.) Much of the traditional application of this passage to homosexual activity is based upon a mistranslation in the Authorized Version:

There shall be no *whore* of the daughters of Israel, nor a *sodomite* of the sons of Israel. Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord thy God for any vow; for even both these are abomination unto the Lord thy God. (*Italics mine.*)

Far more reliable are the renderings found in most modern

translations:

No Israelite woman shall become a temple-prostitute, and no Israelite man shall prostitute himself in this way. You shall not allow a common prostitute's fee, or the pay of a male prostitute, to be brought into the house of the Lord your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both of them are abominable to the Lord your God. (NEB)

The central word at issue in this passage is ^{וְזָנָה} (qadesh), the masculine form, and the feminine form of the same word, ^{זָנָה} (qedeshah). While "whore" is simply an inaccurate translation of the feminine form, the translation "sodomite" is wholly unjustified and may be ascribed to a bias in translation without attention to the actual meaning. This may well be a case in which the translators lacked sufficient historical evidence to understand the background of these words.

(The word "sodomite" itself came into English based on the misinterpretation of the story of Sodom which will be discussed next.) Since both the masculine and feminine forms are of the same root, both should be translated "temple" or "cult prostitute".

The cultures which surrounded the Israelites included fertility cults. It was believed by these cults that they could encourage the gods to make the earth and its inhabitants fertile by engaging in intercourse with sacred prostitutes in the temples. The Israelites lived in constant temptation to adopt the religious practices of their neighbors and the focus of this passage is that they are to be set apart with a new understanding of one God who deals with them personally. Objectionable as prostitution may have been in itself, the issue here was the fact that they were not to relate to God in terms of magic and idolatrous rites. The condemnation applied equally to female and male prostitutes, regardless of sexual partners.

In fact, there is no direct reference here to homosexual activity. Some archaeologists and historians believe that male temple prostitutes may have served male worshippers. Others believe they served women. It has been pointed out, significantly,

that it seems unlikely that these prostitutes were engaged in homosexual activity since that would seem pointless in a fertility cult. Whichever scholars you find persuasive, the fact remains that the condemnation of this passage is directed at prostitution, and ritual prostitution at that, whether it was heterosexual or homosexual.

Genesis 19:4-11; Judges 19:22. (Related passages -- Jude 6-7 and II Peter 2:4, 6-8.) Genesis 19:5, the focus of the issue here, is translated:

And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them." (RSV)

The related passage in the story of the men of Gibeah in Judges reads:

Now as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him. (KJV)

The traditional interpretation of the Genesis story of Lot and the destruction of Sodom is that God's reason for destruction of the city was the depravity of the people, particularly expressed here in homosexual behavior. (The passage in Judges is so similar as to convince form critics that elements of it, particularly this verse, were directly borrowed to enhance the story.)

One major point of controversy in this verse is the word יָדָע (yadha), which literally means "to know". Dr. Derek Bailey's pioneer word study in the 1950's of the use of yadha remains significant. The word occurs, outside these two passages, 943 times in the Old Testament and in only 10 of those occurrences does it denote intercourse. The word occurs in five additional instances combined with the word מִשְׁכַּב (mishkabh) to mean simply the act of lying. By comparison, the word שָׁכַב (shakhabh) which is the root of mishkabh occurs fifty times to mean "lie" sexually.

Moreover, in its sexual applications yadha always means heterosexual intercourse. Shakhabh is used of both homosexual and bestial intercourse, as well as heterosexual.

This convinces some interpreters that if the writers had intended the meaning to be homosexual intercourse, they would have used a form of shakhabh and not yadha. By this evidence, and by the simple statistical incidence, they question the traditional interpretation of yadha as sexual.

On the other side of the debate, however, falls the scholarly observation that Dr. Bailey's assertion that yadha here means "to be acquainted with" is off the mark. While its customary meaning is "to know" things, it means an intimate, close and complete knowledge -- hence the sexual interpretation when applied to persons. These interpreters feel that if the men of the city were simply demanding the presence of the visitors to "get acquainted" with them (and perhaps to assault them physically), then Lot's offer of his virgin daughters was unmotivated. They are convinced that Lot's offer was meant as a substitute for other sexual activity. The same argument is applied to the word's occurrence in the verse in Judges.

Dr. Bailey points out an important factor about life in that time and place. Lot had given the hospitality of his home to two strangers to the city. Unknown strangers were suspect in the walled cities of the day. They could have been spies or saboteurs. Lot himself was a "resident alien" in Sodom and had taken in two unknown guests. The men of the city, in Dr. Bailey's estimate, could well have been suspicious and angry. They could have been planning an assault on the guests simply because they were foreigners. This sort of "inhospitality" was a serious crime in that day. Lot was aware of the divine nature of the guests and was so concerned and frightened by the consequences such treatment would bring that, in casting about for any alternative, the first thing he settled on was the offer of his virgin daughters.

Remember the sexist bias of the culture. Lot's daughters were chattel, his property. Their value as chattel, to offer in marriage especially, was enhanced by their virginity. He was, in

Dr. Bailey's opinion, offering the men of the city a valuable bribe. In view of this cultural background, Dr. Bailey feels that high emotions and great danger were involved, from Lot's point of view, quite without any content of homosexual intent.

There are, then, two strong sides of the controversy over the translation of the word yadha. It is interesting that modern translators have seen fit to go further than simply translating it "to know" here, placing varying degrees of interpretation in their renderings of the Genesis verse:

have intercourse with (NEB)
abuse (JB)
rape (Moffatt)

While this issue is important in deciding whether or not there is a connotation of homosexuality in these passages, this is not really the central issue. Whether or not the incident was homosexual, whether or not it was to involve abuse and injury, the reasons for the destruction of Sodom were far larger and more longstanding. A clear definition of the sin of Sodom is found in the Bible itself, in Ezekiel 16:49-50:

This was your sibling Sodom's crime: Sodom and its children lived in pride, in pride, in plenty and in careless ease; Sodom never lent a hand to the weak and wretched. Haughty they grew, and they committed detestable impieties before my face. So I swept them off, when I noticed it. (Moffatt, inclusive)

Note the translation "detestable impieties". This is a much better choice than the usual "abominations". This word occurred in the passage studied in Deuteronomy, as well. We shall examine it when we consider the verses in Leviticus.

According to the writer of Ezekiel, then, Sodom's sin was not primarily sexual. In the general scope of their overall sinfulness, sexual sins could undoubtedly have been part of the transgression. Whether you feel that yadha here is sexual in meaning or not, the attitude of the men, ~~their~~ evident intent to abuse, was simply characteristic of the evil of the city which had

already decided its destruction.

A useful comparison to the indictment in Ezekiel for what Dr. Bailey calls the sin of "inhospitality" may be found in Jesus' words on a similar case, Luke 10:10-12:

But whenever you come to a town and they will not receive you, go out into the streets and say, "The very dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off as a protest. Only be sure of this -- the Realm of God is close at hand". I tell you that it will be more endurable for Sodom on that Great Day than for that town. (Weymouth, inclusive)

Note, too, that in the only other passages which comment on Sodom, II Peter does not refer to a sexual transgression at all and Jude does not define it as homosexual.

It was not until the First Century c.e. that the interpretation of Sodom's sin as homosexual began to emerge in writings. This was in the works of Philo and Josephus. This interpretation did not occur at all in the writings of Jewish religious scholars. The early Church based its antihomosexual interpretation upon acceptance of writings such as those of these two nonreligious scholars. Church historians are beginning to learn that homosexuality was not universally condemned nor a settled issue during the first few centuries of the Church. Some Church "Fathers" were not opposed to it or were even homosexual persons themselves.

By looking at the passages in Genesis and Judges, we can see that, even if the proposed activity was to be sexual, the sin in that moment lay in the intent to violate, to abuse rather than in the choice of object.

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13-14.

You shall not lie with a man as a woman: that is an abomination (NEB)

If a man has intercourse with a man as with a woman, they both

commit an abomination. They shall be put to death; their blood shall be on their own heads. (NEB)

These verses occur in the portion of Leviticus which is known as the "Holiness Code". These were laws specifically addressed to the Hebrew people who were surrounded by pagan and polytheistic peoples. Their uniqueness in worship was constantly in danger of contamination. They were commanded to be holy, set apart to God. This code of laws was to keep them visibly set apart as a reminder to them and a witness to others. It was mandated to keep them separate and maintain their cultic purity.

The word **toebhah** (toebhah) which occurs in these passages is most frequently translated "abomination". In English, "abomination" connotes general distaste and disgust, filthiness. The Hebrew word from which it comes, however, has a specific relationship to idolatry. Moffatt's translation of the word quoted earlier is a good one: "detestable impieties". This translation focuses attention on the fact that the problem here is a religious one, a violation of God's sovereignty. It is applied to practices throughout the Old Testament which were characteristic of idolatry. It refers to any idolatrous practice, not only to sexual ones. The reason cited for the wrongness of these acts, then, was that they were idolatrous. Once again, our knowledge of the culture and history of the time will explain why this was true. In the context of Israelite patriarchal society, anal intercourse between men was regarded with suspicion. The man who was the recipient was viewed as submissive, even passive, very much in accord with the common modern sexist stereotype. It was even customary in some surrounding cultures to consummate the humiliation and defeat of an enemy, especially one who was to become a slave, by subjecting him to anal penetration. This was to emphasize the fact that he was property, of status no better than a woman. This similarity to the role of a woman is the key, for once again we are confronted with the sexist cultural reality that women were chattel and that one of their roles as such was to be the recipient of sexual intercourse.

Israelites believed the male sex to have absolute dignity, inviolable dignity, because males were created in the image of

God. To treat a male like a woman, then, was to violate the image of God and this was idolatrous. This casts a new light on the phrase, "lie with a man as with a woman", or, "has intercourse with a man as with a woman".

Two factors affect our extraction of a universal principle from this specific meaning to the original readers. First, anal intercourse ("sodomy" if you must) does not necessarily imply subjugation or humiliation. It occurs as a frequent variation in lovemaking both in heterosexual and homosexual couples.

Second, the Apostle Paul tells us that Christians are free from the law, including the laws of the Holiness Code. These passages do, however, carry some lesson for us as part of Scripture. The principle which underlies the Holiness Code is that of maintaining our sense of being set apart to God. We may see these laws as examples of conforming to God's standard rather than to other standards. We need to be aware constantly that God commands our first loyalty, just as these laws reminded the Israelites of that. The intrusion of other values and lesser loyalties becomes idolatry.

Beyond the whole of the Holiness Code, however, we may draw a universal principle from the two passages specifically at issue. We now understand that all humans are created in God's image, that each of us, female and male, has absolute dignity and worth as God's creation. We may see, then, that we are to treat no human being as property or as an object. We are to subject no human being to our own will and violate the image of God that they are.

I Corinthians 6:9, I Timothy 1:10.

The central issue here is translation of specific words. Useful translations as a beginning are:

You know perfectly well that people who do wrong will not inherit the realm of God: people of immoral lives, idolaters, adulterers, catamites, sodomites.... (JB, inclusive)

He must keep in mind that no law is ever made for honest people but for the lawless and the insubordinate, for the impious and the sinful, for the irreverent and the profane, for parricides and matricides, murderers, immoral persons, sodomites.... (Moffatt)

The words at issue are *μαλακοί* (ma-la-kee), translated "catamites" above, and *ἀρσενοκοῖται* (ar-sen-o-kee-teh), translated "sodomites" by Moffatt. *μαλακος* comes from a root word (ma-la-kohs) which literally means "soft" (as in clothing) or even "effeminate". But note that effeminacy to the Greeks did not equal homosexuality. The content of "effeminate", however, in the absence of adequate word study led some translators to the unsupported conclusion that the word meant "catamites", even a sort of temple prostitution. However, the word was used in contemporary literature to mean moral weakness, sometimes even cowardice. It was an adjective which Paul used here as a noun. The fact that he speaks of people who do wrong (the tense means people who are now doing wrong and will continue to do wrong -- a habitual practice) indicates a particular reference. So, the combination of evidence indicates a translation of "the morally weak" or, as Moffatt has translated it, "immoral persons".

The second word, *ἀρσενοκοῖται*, appears in both passages. Once again, an adjective becomes a noun characterizing a person by a habitual behavior. Forms of the word in writings fairly contemporary with this one indicate that it does probably refer to a form of temple prostitution, a practice which persisted in some cultures. In later centuries the word began to apply more broadly to excessive, perhaps abusive sexual practices. Even in its appearance as a noun in the Sixth Century Penitential of Joannes Jejunator, Patriarch of Constantinople, it is clear that the word applies to both heterosexual and homosexual activity. Therefore, it is certainly not a specific reference to homosexual activity in this early usage and the translation "sodomite" is without merit. The word might better be translated "temple prostitute".

Neither of these words applies to homosexual persons, or specifically to homosexual activity. One refers to a form of prostitution and the other probably to consistent moral weakness,

of whatever sort. The use of the adjective "homosexual" as a noun, as happens in English, is unjustified in the translation of Greek. Greek had no word equivalent to the use of "homosexual" as a noun. There were a number of Greek words for people who engaged in certain homosexual practices. Had the writers meant to indicate homosexual activity, there were certainly words they could have used. The two words in question do not even approach such meanings.

They occur in lists of crime and abuse of other persons. And the teaching of Scripture here as in Leviticus, is a reminder that Christians are to relate to others in love and not to use them as objects. Persons who consistently and habitually objectify others, as Paul points out, cannot be in God's realm since they obviously do not understand God's love.

It is interesting, then, to look at the ways various translators have rendered these words, reflecting their biases. Note, especially, the translations which have chosen to ignore that fact that there are two quite different words at issue in the I Corinthians passage. They have combined them without comment under one erroneous designation. The words in I Corinthians are translated:

Nor effeminate, nor homosexuals. (ASV)
Men guilty of unnatural crime. (Weymouth)
nor homosexuals. (RSV)
or of homosexual perversion. (NEB)
Nor catamites nor sodomites. (Moffatt)

The word in I Timothy is translated:

sodomites (Weymouth)
homosexuals (ASV)
immoral ... with boys or with men (JB)
perverts (NEB)
sodomites (PSV)

Romans 1:26-27.

That is why God has abandoned them to degrading passions: why their women have turned from natural intercourse to unnatural practices and why their menfolk have given up natural intercourse to be consumed with passion for each other, men doing shameless things with men and getting an appropriate reward for their perversion. (JB)

It is crucial to point out the caution expressed earlier about the process of interpretation: it is dangerous to attempt the study of these two verses out of the context of Paul's whole discussion. They occur in the midst of a discussion of idolatry. "That is why" refers to the fact that they have been putting other things before God, in this case their sexual desires, often associated with their idolatrous religions.

The first important issue which arises in this passage centers on whether verse 26 speaks of homosexuality among women. The Greek word μετελλαβόντες (meh-teel-lax-ahn), translated "turned from" or "changed", only says that the women altered former practices. It does not say what their new practices were. It does not specify that they were homosexual ones. The reason for believing that they were comes from the first word in verse 27.

In Greek, the word ὁμοίως (oh-mee-os), translated in the Jerusalem Bible as "and", is more accurately translated "likewise" or "in the same way". It has the grammatical effect of an equals sign. Since the practices of the men Paul mentions in verse 27 are clearly homosexual, the word ὁμοίως indicates that the practices in verse 26 are, as well. If we accept this reasoning from grammar, verse 26 is the only reference in Scripture to homosexual activity among women.

In speaking of these homosexual practices, Paul uses the phrase παρὰ φύσιν (pa-rav-pee-seen). Translated in the Jerusalem Bible as "unnatural", it is more literally "against nature". This phrase must not be confused with the same phrase, against nature (contra naturam), which is used in traditional theology to condemn homosexual behavior. In theological terms, the contra naturam

argument is based upon human biology, not upon religious tradition. When Paul used the phrase *παρὰ φύσιν*, he was speaking of cultural and Jewish traditional matters. Anything which was contrary to Jewish religious imperatives was in Paul's writing "against nature". This characterization, then, corresponds to the Hebrew word toebhah, studied earlier. Paul saw violation of Jewish Law and tradition as idolatry, which is the problem he is discussing in this chapter. In other words, he considers these lustful sexual practices to be idolatrous, rather than biologically unnatural.

Paul uses the word *ἀφέντες* (a-phen-des) of the action of the men in verse 27. The word is translated "given up" or "left" or "abandoned". Some interpreters feel that this word means that Paul was talking about people who leave heterosexual behavior which is "natural" to them for homosexual behavior which is not. They maintain that for some people homosexual behavior is already the "natural" course and this verse is not meant for those people.

This interpretation fails to allow for the variety of human experience. Like Paul himself, it assumes that people fall at one sexual/preferential pole or the other. The continuum proposed by the Kinsey Institute in its 1948 publication pictures humans on a graduated scale of sexual preference from zero (entirely heterosexual) to six (entirely homosexual). How does this interpretation of *ἀφέντες*, then, relate to people who are primarily homosexual but, because of the stigma and pressure of society, behave heterosexually? How does it relate to people who are primarily heterosexual but not completely, or to people who are ambisexual? In forming an interpretation of any passage of Scripture, we must take care to carry it through to its conclusion. We must also take care to avoid interpretations which seem to serve us without concern for their general application and consistency of reasoning.

Other interpreters emphasize a point made earlier. There was no Greek word or concept which was equivalent to using the word "homosexual" as a noun, a person whose lifestyle was consistently homosexual. People, as the usage of Greek shows,

engaged in homosexual behaviors but were not categorized by them. Paul, not only as an educated Roman citizen but as a Jew, was not accustomed to thinking of a "homosexual person". He may well have believed all homosexual activity, as do many unenlightened persons today, to be "leaving" behind heterosexual activity.

Paul's personal and cultural bias included the Jewish view of the absolute dignity of the male sex, which was discussed earlier. Jews believed that a man was incomplete without a wife and children. (And yet, Paul was able to advise at another point that one should not marry unless absolutely compelled by passion to do so. He was celibate and counselled this as the best course of awaiting Jesus' return.) It is apparent from this passage that Paul probably did not believe that homosexual activity could come in the context of love and relationship. He uses the word *o-rēsis* (o-rēx-ees), translated as "desire" or "lust" or "passion", in referring to homosexual activity. He believed that such behavior could only be self-centered, using the other as an object, and in the process refusing to acknowledge the sovereignty of God.

The evidence of experience and observation shows that homosexual activity can and does occur in the context of relationship, as well as outside of it. It is, like heterosexual activity, of neutral ethical value. It becomes "good" or "evil" depending upon the way it is expressed. Both heterosexual and homosexual activity are subject to God's guidance, to the ethical guidelines of Scripture. Some homosexual activity and some heterosexual activity do fall in to the realm of lust and idolatry explored in this passage of Scripture. While Paul may have recognized only lust in homosexual activity (and apparently in much of heterosexual activity), it is important to see the universal lesson of this passage for every Christian.

As Paul explains, the result of putting self or things before commitment to God is disastrous. When we so abandon ourselves to desire and selfishness that the other's personhood is obscured by our lust, then we are not acknowledging God as part of that relationship. God will allow each of us to go as far as we will. God has granted each of us freedom of choice, even if our choice is self-destruction. So, as Paul says, if we insist on

giving ourselves up to our lust, God will allow us to do so and will not abridge our freedom to reject God.

THE CREATION ACCOUNTS.

The accounts of creation found in the first two chapters of Genesis do not specifically refer to homosexuality. However, they are used as the basis for the traditional argument that homosexual behavior is contra naturam. This argument begins with the fact that human beings are created male and female by God. Homosexual activity, it says, seems to be a violation of the complementary sexuality of two genders.

This argument is based on simple biology. It says that God is revealed in nature, which is true to some extent. However, it then makes biological gender equal to the essence of our being. That is a simple mistake often made in history in the attempt to understand God through nature alone. Placing so heavy an emphasis on the biological facts implies that the imago Dei (image of God) is physical.

However, Jesus told us that God is Spirit. In other words, the essential being of God is Spirit. Since Scripture tells us that we are created in the image of God, then we, too, are spiritual beings. In the New Testament we learn that our physical being, imperfect, will be transformed, that the material from which we are created gives way to the fuller, eternal spiritual being which God has made us.

When someone says that homosexuality is "unnatural", one could respond that homosexual activity occurs "naturally" in every species of mammal. However, just as the initial assumption from biology is irrelevant, so is that response. Human beings are more than animals. We are created spiritually in God's image. It is irrelevant that homosexual behavior occurs in other mammals because sexuality among humans is a spiritual, relationship issue. We transcend as eternal, spiritual beings our animal biology. The two are not separate, but a unified whole.

Many traditional theologians argue that the purpose of God in the creation account in Genesis is to "be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth". The purpose of sexual differentiation, in this view, is reproduction. Since homosexual activity does not lead to reproduction, it is believed to be a violation of God's purpose. At the time of the writing of that creation account, a high value was placed on rapid increase in population. Historical criticism reveals that growing numbers of people were needed to conduct the work of the society and to defend it. Life spans were short, the hold on life in a hostile world was tenuous, and people had to be replaced through reproduction to insure the continuation of the human race. In our time and place of overpopulation, however, we must look beyond the original reading to understand the universal principle.

To be sure, sexuality does involve the capacity for reproduction, and this is important to racial survival. This reproductive function is not and never has been threatened by the existence throughout history of homosexual persons. Scripture gives us a larger view of the purpose of sexuality.

Source criticism of the Hexateuch, as stated earlier, has indicated the presence of four separate groups of writings. These are intertwined to form the six books. Examination shows that there are actually two creation stories in the first chapters of Genesis. One begins with Genesis 1:1 and ends at 2:4a, where the second begins. The second account is of earlier origin, coming from the J source about 950 b.c.e. The first account comes from the later P source, between 550 and 500 b.c.e. This later account is the one which maintains that one of the purposes of sexual differentiation is procreation.

In the first account we find the strong emphasis on God's personal relationship with the human and God's major expressed purpose was to give companionship. It was not good, in God's eyes, to be alone. God wanted human beings to share love and companionship in their sexuality. We have the capacity to share love in this way far more frequently than simply with the intent of procreation. Human beings are not seasonally sexual, as are many animals. We respond to emotional, affectional stimuli. The

lesson of experience is that, first, sexual activity is fulfilling and possible at a biological level between people of the same sex. Second, and more important, the purpose of companionship -- sharing love -- is realized in this way between many, perhaps most, homosexual couples.

SUMMARY

Though we have looked at certain passages which have been used as condemnation, and have begun to develop more reliable interpretations of them, we must not forget that Scripture has more to say to us. You can probably think of passages of Scripture that helped to waken the need in you for this study. God speaks of love and acceptance in different ways to each of us through different passages and at different times. And God often combines this revelation to us in Scripture with personal revelation through the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives.

As you come to realize that traditional condemnation has very little basis in sound interpretation, continue to study what the Bible does say. Read of the continuing invitation from God to love and acceptance. Read of the relationship with God for which we are created. Read of the incredible expression of love which is Jesus Christ. Read of the support and comfort and enabling which is God's Holy Spirit. And read of our responsibility in Christian living.

God will transform by grace our self-loathing, our striving to be what others demand instead of what God requires and the absence of joy in our lives. All that is necessary is our faith. God's norm, our only law as Christians, is love:

And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and foremost commandment. And a second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the prophets." Matthew 22:35-40 (ASV)

It is by this law that we are to live. In this light, we must interpret Scripture. We can bring this joyful truth to those who would condemn us. And even more, we can share it with sisters and brothers who struggle in the darkness of self-oppression and the loneliness they feel without the assurance of God's love. Not

even these eight brief passages condemn us. All of the Bible, all of God's Word, tells of love and hope. That is our Good News.

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